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Professional Journal Reading #3 – Using Technology in Project-Based Learning

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"We live in an age where you can't get away with just giving kids information, because they already have at their fingertips almost all the information that exists in the universe," stated Susan McCray, a humanities and English teacher at Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine. In the article “Project Fun Way: When Project Learning and Technology Meet,” writer, Kathy Baron, examines project-based learning in a one-to-one computer environment at Casco Bay High School and nearby middle school, King Middle School. Project Based Learning is an instructional approach built upon realistic learning activities that engage student interest and motivation. Project-based activities in the classroom are designed to answer a question or solve a problem that generally reflects the type of learning and work people do in the everyday world outside the classroom.

Casco High School and King Middle School began to ask the question if project-based learning was possible without technology. "I can't imagine designing the curriculum that I do without being able to click onto the Internet and get all the materials and resources that are available, and I can't imagine my students not being able to do that either," says Susan McCray. The answer was simple for them, no. The school noticed that technology is an integral part of the real world thus the real world simulated projects in class would need to include technology to be authentic. To implement technology into both schools’ project based learning, a one-to-one computer program was implemented.

With all new teaching styles, there are always skeptics who do not believe that the new system of teaching will provide adequate education for the future generations. Disbelievers in project-based learning challenge that such projects are not academically rigorous. The teacher first quoted, Susan McCray discards the criticism by saying, "It's not just about, 'Oh cool, we have a tool and we can make cool stuff,'" she says. Her students not only have to know the knowledge but be able to apply that knowledge in a real world setting. In project based learning, students may be applying several different ideals at the same time.

The successes at Casco Bay High School and King Middle School began to prove to me the importance of pairing technology to project-based learning. Students and teachers were affected academically and emotionally. The communities of both schools are inviting to students. In today’s schools it is difficult to find very many 17 year old students that are excited to be at school but not for Casco Bay students especially Yuki Hall. She states, “"For me, going to Casco Bay each day is like Harry Potter going to Hogwarts. It fits. It's me. I am excited to go to school every day. I wake up and I jump out of bed because of how happy I am to be here." Besides providing a inviting learning environment, King Middle School and Casco Bay High School have seen academic results as well. Both school score above the state average on standardized tests.

Project-based learning takes the knowledge that we already know and applies it to the real world. Project-based learning has been practiced in art classrooms for decades. Students learn a theory or lesson in art and get a chance to explore the idea through their own personal artwork. As an art teacher, I have seen firsthand how concepts and ideas can meet with creativity in projects. Thinking creativity through projects is the way we should be setting up our students for the real world. Let’s stop focusing on test scores and standards to get back to the heart of learning, innovation. While I do believe it does take a very creative and innovate staff of teachers and administration, like at King Middle School and Casco Bay High School, to make project-based learning a success, but the theory and results of project-based learning cannot be ignored.

Works Cited

Baron, K. (2010, March 15). Project Fun Way: When Project Learning and Technology Meet | Edutopia. K-12 Education & Learning Innovations with Proven Strategies that Work | Edutopia. Retrieved December 4, 2011, from http://www.edutopia.org/stw-maine-project-based-learning-technology-overview